

United States Department of the Interior National Park Service

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National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

FEB 08 1988

NATIONAL REGISTER

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name Mount Zion Methodist Episcopal Church South
other names/site number Mount Zion United Methodist Church

2. Location

street & number Mount Zion Road
city, town Fall River
state Tennessee code TN county Lawrence code TN099 zip code N/A

3. Classification

Table with 3 columns: Ownership of Property, Category of Property, and Number of Resources within Property. Includes checkboxes for private/public ownership and building/site/structure/object categories.

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A
Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.
Signature of certifying official: Deborah L. Byers
Date: 2/4/88
Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, Tennessee Historical Commission

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.
Signature of commenting or other official
Date
State or Federal agency and bureau

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:
Entered in the National Register.
determined eligible for the National Register.
determined not eligible for the National Register.
removed from the National Register.
other, (explain):
Signature of the Keeper
Date of Action

## 6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION: Religious structure  
TRANSPORTATION: Pedestrian-related  
FUNERARY: Cemetery

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION: Religious structure  
TRANSPORTATION: Pedestrian-related  
Road-related(vehicular)  
FUNERARY: Cemetery

## 7. Description

Architectural Classification  
(enter categories from instructions)

NO STYLE

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation STONE  
walls Weatherboard

roof Tin  
other WOOD

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The 1885 Mt. Zion Methodist Episcopal Church South, the adjacent cemetery, and two bridges across the Clear Fork of Little Sugar Creek are being nominated as an interrelated complex. The complex is the central focus of the extremely rural Mt. Zion community, a loosely-defined and scarcely-populated area on the southern edge of the Eastern Highland Rim. The small frame Methodist chapel, second building on the spot, is one of the best surviving unaltered examples of late Victorian period vernacular chapel architecture in the southern Lawrence County area. The neighboring cemetery dates to at least 1834, and contains the graves of more than 400 people who lived in the remote and isolated neighborhood. Two interesting bridges and a ford provide the only access to the site from the north bank of Sugar Creek and are, therefore, closely associated with the church and cemetery. A circa 1933 cabled suspension footbridge, replacing a ca. 1900 structure, is the only means of crossing the creek during freshets. The much later 1972 underwater bridge was the first built in Lawrence County, and remains in continuous use. The church is located on the edge of a slight bluff on the south side of the creek; the cemetery is located in a field to the south side of the church. The two bridges cross the creek at the church; the suspension bridge to its side and the underwater bridge is a short distance downstream at the road. Below the two is the original ford, the first means of access to the church and cemetery.

Despite its name, the Mt. Zion church complex is nestled in a deep valley along Clear Fork, a tributary of Sugar Creek. The valley is quite isolated, with access only by rough unimproved roads. Some farms are located in the lowlands nearby, but the site is largely encroached by the dense oak-hickory forest of the southern Highland Rim.

## INVENTORY

1. Mt. Zion Methodist Episcopal Church South. 1885. The present frame chapel replaces an earlier log church house. The weatherboarded frame chapel is laid out on the common rectangular hall plan, rests on a stone pier foundation, and is topped by a front-gable tin roof; on top of this is a small weatherboarded belfry with a pyramidal roof. The main front faces west and features two entrances with six-panel wooden doors topped by transoms and peaked lintels. A rounded-arch louvered ventilator is located just below the peak of the roof.

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The north and south sides of the church are identical, each with three double-hung sash windows with 6/6 lights, topped by peaked wooden lintels. The east or rear side is plain, but for two windows similar to those on the sides, but with smaller four-light sashes.

The interior retains its original appearance. Interior walls are covered with narrow beadboard siding. Floors are unfinished poplar, fastened with broad cut nails. There is no expressed decorative work. Heating is done by an iron wood stove. Pews are original unfinished poplar, and the altar furniture dates from the late nineteenth century. (Contributing)

2. Mt. Zion Cemetery. 1830s-present. The cemetery is located across the road from the church, which it predates, and is the burying ground for the entire community. The land was donated by the Jonathan McMasters family in 1834, when their son Job died and was buried here. Over 400 monuments are extant. A number of slaves are also buried in the cemetery in unmarked graves. (Non-contributing)
3. Harrison Gravehouse. 1899. In the cemetery is Lawrence County's only surviving gravehouse, marking the grave of Buren Harrison (died 1899). The small frame structure is topped by a tin gabled roof, and decorated with shingles, vergeboards, and sawn palings. (Contributing)
4. Suspension Bridge. Ca. 1933. The early twentieth century suspension bridge extends on cables approximately 100 feet across Little Sugar Creek. A wooden frame work and woven wire caging support foot-planks running the length of the structure. Planks and cables have occasionally been replaced, but the structure retains its basic original form. (Contributing)
5. Underwater Road Bridge. 1972. This bridge was built alongside an old ford in 1972. The underwater bridge, first of its kind in the county, was built by volunteers with materials provided by the Lawrence County road department. The bridge is really a long broad concrete slab across the creek bed. The bridge is not passable at high water; hence the need for the two bridges. (Non-contributing)
6. Ford. 1830s. Just below the bridge is the old ford, now unused. The old sunken road bed paralleling the present route crosses the creek at this point, and the cuts in the bank can be discerned. (Contributing)

**8. Statement of Significance**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally  statewide  locally

Applicable National Register Criteria  A  B  C  D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions)  A  B  C  D  E  F  G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)  
ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance  
1885; 1899; Circa 1933  
Circa 1830s

Significant Dates  
1885

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Cultural Affiliation  
N/A

Significant Person  
N/A

Architect/Builder  
James Bassham, builder

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

The Mt. Zion Methodist Episcopal Church South complex near Leoma in the southern Third Civil District of Lawrence County, Tennessee, is being nominated for its local significance to the Mt. Zion community (pop. 6) and Lawrence County in architecture. The 1885 Methodist Church, the Mt. Zion Cemetery, and two bridges connecting the church with the opposite side of Sugar Creek are the central focus of the much-depopulated, but historic, Mt. Zion community, one of the earliest settlements in the isolated southeast corner of Lawrence County, four miles north of the Alabama state line. The church was established before 1850 and the second and present structure was erected in 1885. The small frame chapel has seen almost continuous use since its construction.

The area was first settled by Jonathan McMasters, who was born in North Carolina in the 1760s, and flourished in the present Mt. Zion neighborhood around 1822. His log house survived until recently on a hillside above the present church. McMasters had a son, John, who married a woman named Charity. He died 5 September 1834, and was the first person buried in the present Mt. Zion cemetery. The land for the cemetery was donated by the McMasters family. It apparently was first meant for a family cemetery, but, following the establishment of the Mt. Zion Methodist Church, it has served both as a church and community burying ground.

The congregation was apparently organized around the middle of the nineteenth century. The first church was a log structure, no longer extant, located above the present chapel on a hillside over Sugar Creek; this building also served for some time as a schoolhouse. The log building was standing by the time of the Civil War, as a Confederate infantry company was raised here in 1861 by Captain Lewis Miller and Lt. James White. It was named Mt. Zion, despite its peaceful valley location, and the community that coalesced around it took its name from the church.

Despite the recruitment of the Confederate company, it appears that the congregation sided with the Union cause during the Civil War. In 1884, the

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

Hagan, Imogene. Mount Zion: My Home Sweet Home on Sugar Creek,  
Lawrenceburg: Privately published, 1986. Copies at Lawrence  
County Library

Fielder, Nick, "Gravehouses: Mortuary Folk Architecture." The Courier,  
Vol. XXI, No. 1, October 1982

See continuation sheet

Previous documentation on file (NPS): N/A

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67)  
has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings  
Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering  
Record # \_\_\_\_\_

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository: \_\_\_\_\_

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreeage of property 1 acre

35° 3'57" N. Latitude      87° 14' 00" W. Longitude

UTM References

A            
 Zone      Easting      Northing

C

B            
 Zone      Easting      Northing

D

See continuation sheet

Appleton 59SW

Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated area is shown as Lot 4 on the accompanying Wayne County  
tax assessment map.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes all property currently associated with the Mt. Zion  
Methodist Church complex.

See continuation sheet

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Richard Quin, Historic Preservation Planner  
 organization South Central Tennessee Development date 7 December 1987  
 street & number P.O. Box 1346 District \_\_\_\_\_ telephone (615) 381-2040  
 city or town Columbia state Tennessee zip code 38402-1346

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log building burned; locals maintain that the fire was likely set by pro-Southern sympathizers angry with the old "Yankee" church.

In 1884 and 1885, the present frame chapel was constructed. Mr. John McMasters and his wife, Mary gave the land for the church October 31 of that year. Mr. James Bassham was in charge of the building program.

Trustees at the time were Bassham, J. J. Millerson, J. M. Shelton, L. N. Hagan, and W. C. Gills. Funds for the church's construction were raised by subscription. The church is one of the best surviving examples of simple Victorian vernacular chapel architecture in isolated southern Lawrence County. The small frame building is laid out on the common rectangular hall plan and topped by a front-gable roof. A small belfry topped by a pyramidal roof is located at the apex of the roof over the entrance. The original interior remains, unaltered.

After World War II, the isolated valley was largely abandoned and services were discontinued by the 1950s, except for an annual homecoming at the church. In the late 1960s, however, people again began meeting at Mt. Zion church for informal services and singing. Since 1980, under the encouragement of the Richardson family, services have been held steadily at the Church. Homecoming Day is the second Sunday of July.

The Mt. Zion Cemetery behind the church contains the graves of over 400 people. Although probably established as a family cemetery, the graveyard has become the main burying ground for the church and surrounding community. Slaves are buried here in unmarked graves among their masters, and, also, according to tradition, an Indian. Early in the twentieth century, the cemetery was largely abandoned and covered with choking vegetation. A trust fund has been established and the cemetery is, today, very well maintained. The burying ground continues to be used both by the church and the rest of the community.

In the cemetery is Lawrence County's only remaining gravehouse, a small frame structure decorated with imbricated shingles and vergeboards, its posts joined by scroll-sawn candle-shaped wooden palings. It covers the grave of Buren Harrison. An earlier gravehouse covered the graves of Willis Sills' three wives (Janie Eliz, Missouri Jane, and Margaret Jane), but it has since collapsed. The building of gravehouses was common around the turn of the century, when it was the custom of some affluent families to build little houses over the graves of their loved ones, the reasons apparently to protect the graves from the elements or loose stock and rooting animals. Few examples of gravehouses remain today. Their common characteristics include rectangular plans and front-gable roofs. Most

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cover only one or two graves. This particular gravehouse is a good illustration of this type of folk architecture with its palings, gable roof, and decorative vergeboards.

Two small bridges on the church property provide a link with the opposite brink of Sugar Creek, and provide the only access to the remote churchyard. The swinging suspension bridge, put up in the early twentieth century and replacing an earlier one a little farther upstream, is the oldest and one of the only two remaining in Lawrence County.

The 1972 underwater bridge across Sugar Creek was the first such bridge built in Lawrence County. The idea of the underwater bridge was conceived by Mr. Grady Bassham of the Mt. Zion community. The Lawrence County road department agreed to furnish the materials if volunteers would do the work; seven or eight hundred dollars was appropriated for the project. Mr. Bassham, Howard Leighton, and Frank Price did most of the work. After the bridge was built, the road department built a number of others around the county. Just below the bridge is the old ford, the route of access to the church before the bridges were built.

The church, cemetery, ford, and bridges form an interrelated complex with continuous ties to the establishment of the Mt. Zion community. These are the only historic structures of community use, other buildings in the area being limited to residences and their dependencies. Mt. Zion is one of the best unaltered examples of Victorian vernacular architecture in Lawrence County. With the exception of several Roman Catholic churches listed together as a thematic group (German Catholic Churches of Lawrence County, NR 10/10/84), no other unaltered church buildings survive from the late nineteenth century in the county. The cemetery contains the only surviving gravehouse in Lawrence County, and the site of the county's only other known gravehouse. The property, isolated as it is, retains much the same appearance as of the time the church was built.

